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ABSTRACT

To examine socialization practices of mothers and fathers toward first-born children with and without a sibling, this study surveyed 151 adult first-born children (22 only-child females, 59 females with a sibling, 25 only-child males, and 45 males with a sibling) who completed a child-rearing practices report for each of their parents. The child-rearing practices report consisted of seven factors: (1) emphasis on achievement; (2) authoritarian control; (3) expression of affect; (4) encouragement of independence; (5) overinvestment in the child; (6) protectiveness of the child; and (7) suppression of aggression. Subjects also completed self-descriptions. Results indicated that parents did not discriminate on the basis of their child's sex on practices emphasizing achievement, independence, and overprotectiveness, though first-borns received more encouragement for independence from both parents than did only-children. Generally, results indicated that fathers showed more differential treatment based on the sex of the child than did mothers, with greater openness in expressing affect and greater investment in daughters than sons. Parents showed greater authoritarian control toward boys than girls, and more control with female only-children than female first-borns. (MM)

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DIFFERENTIAL SOCIALIZATION OF ONLY AND FIRST-BORN CHILDREN

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Abstract

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Little is known of the practices differentially affecting first-born children with from those without a sibling. This study examined socialization practices of mothers and fathers toward first-born boys and girls with and without a sibling. Eighty-one female and 70 male first-born completed a child rearing practices report for each parent. There were no differences between mothers and fathers in their encouraging independence, achievement, and overprotectiveness for boys and girls. Authoritarian control was higher for parents of boys, and suppression of aggression higher for parents of girls. Generally, mothers are even-handed in their expression of affect and overinvestment in their child, while fathers show more with their daughters. Both parents are higher on authoritarian control and overinvestment in the child with only children rather than first-born children with siblings. Whether a first-born child had a brother or a sister did not affect the parental practices in these comparisons. Implications for research are discussed.

Introduction

Demographic trends in the United States suggest an increase in one-child families, a pattern expected throughout the remainder of this century. Much early literature depicted the only child as negative or dysfunctional relative to children from larger families (Blake, 1981; Rosenberg & Falk, 1989; Rosenberg & Leino, 1987; Thompson, 1974). Recently a

substantial literature has emerged depicting the only child in a more favorable light, documenting few notable differences from first-born children with siblings (Belmont & Marolla, 1972; Falbo, 1982; Falbo & Polit, 1986). Rosenberg and Hyde (1991) attempted to explain these inconsistencies by providing evidence that there are several types of only children.

Dunn and Kendrick's observational studies showed dramatic changes in interactions between only children and their mothers coincided with the arrival of a sibling (i.e., becoming a first-born with a sibling). These interactions reflected an increase in negative confrontations, a decrease in joint play, less time spent holding by the mother, less maternal display of affection, more verbal prohibitions, and less initiating conversations (1980, 1981a, 1981b). Presumably changes in the family context, division of resources with the arrival of a second child, and changing developmental sequences as a function of age underlay such alterations in only child-mother interactions.

In the present study, we wondered after the socialization practices of both mothers and fathers with sons and daughters and both categories of first-borns, with and without (OC) siblings. Rather than restricting observations to daytime and maternal availability, retrospective reports by the subjects appeared to be a feasible empirical approach. There exists a substantial literature on the subjects' recall of parental child-rearing practices attesting to the validity of children's and young adult's reports of parental behaviors (Crase, Foss, & Colberg, 1980; Schaefer, 1965; Schludermann & Schludermann, 1970).

The Study

This study examined individual's recollections of the socialization practices of mothers and fathers with sons and daughters and both categories of first-borns, with and without (OC) a sibling, as well as the impact of sex of the sibling on these practices. Retrospective reports by the children, now adults, were employed.

The subjects comprised 22 only females, 32 first-born females with a brother, 27 first-born females with a sister, 25 only males, 24 first-born males with a brother, and 21 first-born males with a sister, all lower division students at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. All subjects completed a child-rearing practices report (CRPR) (Block, J.H., 1986) for each parent, composed of 7 factors (39 items): emphasis on achievement, authoritarian control, expression of affect, encourage independence, overinvestment in the child, protectiveness of child, and suppression of aggression. To facilitate data collection, a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree was employed. Interspersed between the CRPR description of one parent, the subject completed a self-description (Block, 1961), and then filled out the CRPR for the remaining parent.

The data were subjected to a multivariate analysis of variance.

Results

The results of the MANOVA indicate no differences by mother or father for boys or girls on socialization practices of achievement, over-protectiveness, or encouraging independence. While parental differences did not differ on the latter, there was a strong but non-significant tendency for parents of first-born boys and girls to encourage independence for them more than for only children.

Both mothers and fathers exerted more authoritarian control with boys than girls ($p<.01$, $p<.05$). There were no differences in authoritarian control for male and female only children. Both parents exerted more control with OCs than first-borns.

When it comes to their memories of parental expression of affect, mothers do not differentiate by sex of the child, while fathers do show significantly higher expression for girls than boys (.0002).

Neither parent differentiates expression of affect with the OC, whether male or female, but among first-born children, however, both parents show greater affect with girls

than boys. Similarly, for overinvestment in the child, mothers did not distinguish between male and female children, while fathers again show overinvestment in the girl rather than the boy (.002). Both parents show greater overinvestment in the OC regardless of sex than the first-born, this difference attains significance only for fathers (.003).

Finally, both parents suppress aggression more with girls than boys (.03, .08). These patterns hold true for first-borns and only children.

No differences were found in first-borns contingent on the sex of the sibling.

Discussion & Conclusion

This study, which relied on adult subjects' recall of socialization behaviors by their parents, revealed surprising similarities in mother and father behaviors towards their children. Parents did not discriminate on the basis of the sex of their child on practices emphasizing achievement, independence, and overprotectiveness, though first-borns receive more encouragement for independence from both parents than do only children. Generally, results indicate greater even-handedness by mothers (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974), while fathers show more differential treatment based on the sex of the child, with greater openness in expressing affect and greater investment in daughters than sons.

Expected sex differences are manifest on measures of authoritarian control, with parents showing greater control with boys than girls, and more control with female only children than female first-borns. Suppression of aggression is uniformly higher by both parents in the memories of females than males. Overinvestment in the child is greater for only children than for first-borns.

There was little evidence in the present study that for first-borns the sex of their younger sibling was of critical importance in our measures. This finding is consistent with earlier work suggesting that older siblings have more influence on the younger than vice-versa (Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg, 1970).

The present results suggest great changes in perception of and subsequent conditioning of sex differences in contemporary culture. Parents appear more alike in emphasizing achievement, overprotectiveness, and encouraging independence, regardless of the sex of the child, an outcome that might be suspect a generation ago. And finally, not unlike the changes wrought by emphasis on the one-child family in China, the absence of a sibling (i.e., the OC) in this study is accompanied by less independence training, greater expression of affect, and greater over-investment in the child by the parent.

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